



Photo courtesy of Elkhorn Slough Foundation staff

Mark Silberstein, executive director of the Elkhorn Slough Foundation, and former Caltrans biologist Carrie Swanberg walk through the maritime chaparral of the Elkhorn Slough Reserve, property that Caltrans bought to mitigate construction on Highway 101 and donated to the foundation.

Partnerships Preserve Unique Habitat

Land Donation, Restoration Offsets Highway Work in Monterey, San Diego Area

In one of the first transactions of its kind for Caltrans, a unique and environmentally sensitive swath of coastal habitat in Monterey County has been handed over to a nonprofit environmental foundation to fulfill offsite mitigation requirements for a Highway 101 construction project.

In this case, Caltrans bought 167 acres and later transferred the property to the Elkhorn Slough Foundation, along with an endowment to manage the land. The property was acquired in 2008 when Caltrans was preparing to make major improvements to the US 101 Prunedale corridor. The stretch was made safer by eliminating left-turn traffic, and building interchanges and an overpass. The project was completed in 2014.

The property known as the Elkhorn Highlands Reserve consists mostly of maritime chaparral habitat, along with freshwater wetlands and oak woodlands. It is home to the endangered California Tiger Salamander and a variety of other species of animals and rare plants, including endangered Yadon's piperia and threatened Monterey spineflower.

The reserve connects adjoining parcels in the Elkhorn Slough watershed that extends seven miles inland and occupies about 80 square miles in northern Monterey County. The watershed includes the largest tract of tidal

Elkhorn Slough Mitigation Site



The project also will restore or enhance six lagoons in the (San Diego) area, which are some of the most significant remaining coastal lagoons in Southern California.

marsh in California outside of San Francisco Bay, and is habitat for more than 340 bird species.

The arrangement with the foundation was made possible by Senate Bills 436 and 1094 passed in the 2011-2012 legislative session that allow state and local agencies to transfer funds to nonprofit organizations, special districts or land trusts for endowing and managing land acquired to offset impacts of a development project.

The legislation allowed Caltrans to transfer the land, along with a \$2 million endowment. The entire deal was worth about \$6.5 million, and was one of the first under SB 436 and SB 1094.

The transfer could serve as a model for similar partnerships in the future.

In another type of partnership at the state's south end, Caltrans is working with San Diego Association of Governments to create several hundred acres of

preserved coastal habitat, and preserve and restore valuable lagoons.

The work is part of the I-5 North Coast Corridor Program, an ambitious makeover of the rail system and portions of Interstate 5 between Oceanside and Solana Beach. The project also will restore or enhance six lagoons in the area, which are some of the most significant remaining coastal lagoons in Southern California.

At San Elijo Lagoon, for example, a contractor is pumping sand to nearby beaches, clearing vegetation, and building a series of dikes along the main lagoon channel and inlet to control water elevations and turbidity. San Elijo is expected to be fully restored in early 2021. The wetland habitat will feature walking trails around the lagoon.

Both the Elkhorn Slough and I-5 North Coast Corridor Project align with sustainability goals outlined in Caltrans' 2015-2020 Strategic Management Plan. The plan notes that Caltrans will focus on transportation impacts affecting people, planet and prosperity. **MM**

Sources: Elkhorn Slough Foundation; Nancy Siepel, Mitigation and Wildlife Connectivity Specialist, Caltrans District 5; Caltrans District 11 Small Business Update; and Hayden Manning, public information officer.



Caltrans photos provided by District 11

The sand on the left was recently dredged from San Elijo Lagoon and is replenishing existing sand at Cardiff State Beach (photo at right).



A bulldozer moves recently pumped sand onto Cardiff State Beach as part of a lagoon restoration project in the San Diego area.